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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001414

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SUBJECT: NO BIBLES IN TASHKENT BOOKSTORES

Classified By: CDA BRAD HANSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 20, Poloff met with the Executive Director of the Uzbekistan Bible Society, who explained that his organization currently faces its most difficult environment since opening in 1993. Since July 2006, the Bible Society has only been able to officially import 500 books in the Uzbek language. In addition, the Bible Society has experienced greater difficulty in distributing its books within Uzbekistan, endured a particularly difficult audit this July, and has been forced to hold its annual conference outside of Uzbekistan for the first time in 15 years. In September, the Bible Society will attempt to import a large number of books in Uzbek, even though the Executive Director admits that the plan is risky and could potentially put the organization in risk of losing its legal registration. The Executive Director added that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find any Bibles, even in Russian, in Uzbekistan. The Executive Director also said that he would travel to Ashgabat in September to explore the possibility of opening a Turkmenistan branch of the Bible Society. The difficult environment the Bible Society has endured in the past year has been shared by several other Protestant churches and organizations. End summary.

CRA LIMITS IMPORT OF CHRISTIAN LITERATURE IN UZBEK

¶2. (C) On July 20, Poloff met with Bible Society of Uzbekistan Executive Director Sergey Mitin, who explained that his organization has faced greater restrictions this year with importing Christian literature in Uzbek (Note: The interdenominational Bible Society is one of seven centrally-registered religious organizations which has the right to publish, import and distribute religious literature in Uzbekistan. End Note.) While the Bible Society has had difficulties with the authorities in the past, the current environment is the worst that the organization has faced. In July 2006, the Bible Society attempted to import from Russia 5,000 copies of a work containing Uzbek translations of several Old Testament books. But when the books arrived at the border, the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) would only permit 500 copies to clear customs, and the rest were impounded at a warehouse (Note: The CRA must approve all religious literature that is imported into the country. End Note.) The CRA refused to explain their decision. Mitin said that he eventually succeeded in bribing lower level custom officials to release the remaining 4,500 books. However, officials at the CRA are not aware that the books have been released, and Mitin is worried that they might find out and punish his organization. Since the July 2006 shipment, the Bible Society has not imported any Christian literature into the country.

OTHER RECENT DIFFICULTIES FOR THE BIBLE SOCIETY

13. (C) This year, the Bible Society has faced greater difficulty in distributing its material within Uzbekistan. According to Mitin, there has been an increase in the number of people who have been searched and detained while traveling with Christian literature, including material that was legally imported into the country by the Bible Society. Mitin notes that on the road from Tashkent to Bukhara alone, there are over 15 separate police checkpoints that travelers must pass through. Currently, the Bible Society only distributes materials through its small store in its Tashkent office. The Bible Society would like to deliver materials directly to churches in the regions, but they currently lack a means of transportation. Mitin requested help from the Embassy in securing funds to purchase a new minivan for this purpose. After the meeting, Mitin provided poloff with a quick tour of the Bible Society's small store, which included some religious material that has not been sanctioned by the CRA.

14. (C) On July 4, Ministry of Justice (MOJ) officials conducted what Mitin described as a particularly stringent audit of the Bible Society's official records. Mitin has not yet received a response from the MOJ regarding the audit, and he is afraid about the possible result. The Government requires the Bible Society to report every three months on its printing, publishing, translating activities and book sales. After every report, the MOJ complains to Mitin that his organization has not provided enough information and requests the names of individuals who have purchased books for their churches, but Mitin has refused to provide them the names of his contacts.

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15. (C) For the first time in 15 years, the Bible Society was forced to hold its annual conference in May in Chimkent, Kazakhstan instead of Tashkent. Last summer, the Government refused to renew the visa of an AmCit Bible Society project coordinator who had lived in Tashkent for over ten years. The AmCit was forced to relocate to Bishkek, where he continues to work for the Society via the internet.

SEPTEMBER IMPORT "TEST CASE": ALL OR NOTHING?

16. (C) In September, the Bible Society plans to import 7,000 copies of a children's Bible in three different formats: Latin Uzbek, Cyrillic Uzbek and Karakalpak. Mitin acknowledged that the plan is provocative and that the vast majority of the books are likely to be confiscated again. According to Mitin, the September import will serve as a "test case" to gauge the Government's reaction. The Bible Society seeks to force the CRA into either allowing the shipment to go through or openly acknowledge that restrictions on importing Christian literature in Uzbek exist. Mitin admits that the plan is risky, and the Bible Society could be accused of missionary activity and liquidated by the Ministry of Justice. But Mitin believes that if the Bible Society is effectively not allowed to import Christian literature in Uzbek, the native language of the vast majority of Uzbekistan's population, the Bible Society might as well close its doors.

NO BIBLES IN TASHKENT BOOKSTORES

17. (C) Outside of the small shop at the Bible Society, it has become increasingly difficult to find Christian literature in any language in Uzbekistan. Mitin stated with absolute conviction that it is impossible to find Bibles, even in Russian, at Tashkent bookstores. Ten years ago, the Bible Society tried to sell its wares through local bookstores, but the owners were harassed by the authorities

and they have since refused to carry such material. The Bible Society has sought permission from CRA leaders, including current acting chairman Ortiq Yusupov and ex-chairmen Shoazim Minovarov, to open another bookstore outside of its office in Tashkent, but its entreaties have been refused. Mitin added that the only place where it is still sometimes possible to find Christian literature is at small outdoor bookstalls (Comment: This is true. Charge saw several Russian language Bibles on sale in bookstalls in Tashkent's largest used market in mid-July. End Comment.)

¶18. (C) Over the course of an afternoon, poloff visited several bookstalls scattered across Tashkent and talked to vendors. Although there was a good selection of Orthodox Christian literature in Russian, poloff was able only to find a total of three Bibles, two in Russian and one New Testament in Uzbek. One of the vendors told poloff that it was virtually impossible to find Bibles in Uzbek, and while Bibles in Russian used to be more commonplace in Tashkent, they have become increasingly scarce, especially in the last year.

BIBLE SOCIETY SEEKS TO OPEN TURKMENISTAN BRANCH

¶19. (C) Mitin said that more than 40 countries in the world have registered Bible Societies, including all of the former Soviet states except Turkmenistan. With a new president in power in Ashgabat, Mitin hopes that the government of Turkmenistan will consider allowing a branch of the Bible Society to register in the country. Mitin plans on traveling to Turkmenistan in September to investigate the issue.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE BIBLE SOCIETY

¶10. (C) The Bible Society in Tashkent opened in 1993 and was officially registered by the Ministry of Justice in 1994. The Bible Society imports Christian literature for the Orthodox, Evangelical, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches in Uzbekistan. Although the Bible Society works with non-Protestant denominations, Mitin himself is a representative of the Baptist Church and the organization is seen by the authorities as Protestant. The Bible Society also translates the Bible into Uzbek. The Bible Society has already translated 15 books of the Old Testament into Uzbek, and every year it translates a few more. Once the books are

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translated, the manuscripts are sent to Russia to be published. Generally, the Bible Society publishes one book a year, which collects together the Books of the Old Testament that have been translated during the year. In addition, the Bible Society periodically translates and imports other Christian literature, including religious books for children. On average, the Bible Society's books cost approximately 7 dollars to produce, and are generally sold for 3 dollars. The books are sold for less or given away to those who cannot afford them. Much of the expense of importing the books goes towards paying import taxes. The Bible Society must pay 20 percent value-added tax (VAT) on all books it imports into Uzbekistan, regardless of whether they are eventually sold or given away.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Like other Protestant organizations, the Bible Society is currently facing an unfavorable environment in Uzbekistan that has grown worse in the last year. We agree that Mitin's strategy of trying to import more books this September than last year is provocative and could potentially draw the wrath of the Ministry of Justice. But it will be interesting to watch the Government's reaction, especially considering that the Government has recently engaged actively

with Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford. Despite the recent problems the Bible Society has faced, the CRA may decide to allow the import of the Christian material in September to demonstrate that it is making progress on religious freedom.

HANSON